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Was there Historical Contact Between Early China and Mesoamerica?

Over the course of the last century a number of scholars have argued for a historical connection between China of the Shang and Zhou periods and Preclassic Mesoamerica (in particular Southern Mexico and Guatemala) in the 1st millennium B.C. Much of the argumentation has centred on perceived similarities in artistic styles and motifs. Recently, Xu Hui (1996; 1999), who is neither a specialist on Early China nor on Mesoamerica, attempted to demonstrate that the Olmec civilization of Mesoamerica, universally judged to be the mother culture of the region, was founded by Shang immigrants. This attempt failed to win scholarly support from Mesoamericanists because of the author's almost complete disregard for the known archaeological data concerning Olmec culture. Similarly, his cavalier attitude towards his comparison of Shang writing and Olmec iconography revealed his ignorance of the basic principles of both systems (see especially the review of Xu's arguments in Zhang He, forthcoming).

A more fruitful line of approach has been to investigate similarities in the calendrical and astrological systems of China and Mesoamerica. In the past this has focused primarily on parallels in lunar calendars and the zodiac (see, for example, Moran/Kelley 1969), but the Asian systems compared have exhibited considerable variation and have little structural similarity to the Mesoamerican calendars. In recent years Whittaker (1990a; 1990b; 2007) has drawn attention to the close structural parallels between the elements of the Chinese ritual calendar (*gan-zhi*) and of the Mesoamerican ritual calendar (*tonalpohualli*). On the surface, the systems appear quite different. The Chinese ritual calendar consists of 60 days named by a cycle of 10 *gan* names running alongside a cycle of 12 *zhi* names, whereas the Mesoamerican calendar in its earliest form consists of 260 days named by a cycle of 20 names running alongside a cycle of 13 numbers.

Nevertheless, there are some features that suggest a common origin of both systems. Year names derive in both regions from the names given to days in the ritual calendar. In both systems animal associations are attached to one of the cycles. Animals are associated with the years named after the *zhi* cycle at least as far back as the middle of the 1st millennium B.C., as Boodberg (1940-41) has shown. Animals are associated with days and years in the Mesoamerican calendar also at least as early as the middle of the 1st millennium B.C. (Whittaker 1990a). In Mesoamerica the ritual calendar is well-attested in the Zapotec culture of Oaxaca in the period 600-300 B.C.

Whether it already existed in the Olmec culture (1200-600 B.C.) is still a matter of debate. An apparent date Dragon 6, painted on an Olmec cave wall, dates to ca. 1000-900 B.C., contemporary with early Western Zhou.

In the Chinese and Mesoamerican systems names in the ritual cycle are associated, among other things, with Dragon, Serpent, Rabbit, Dog, and Monkey. In position 7 of both systems Deer is found. After Qin times Deer was replaced in China with Horse. Position 3 is occupied by Tiger in the Chinese *zhi* cycle, whereas in Mesoamerica the position was presided over by the Jaguar (= Tiger) god of the underworld.

Meanings have been reconstructed by Sinologists for the names of both the *gan* and *zhi* cycles on the basis of the forms of the Shang signs and on words apparently related to these names in Old Chinese (see, for example, the discussions cited in Li Xiaoding 1965). These meanings also appear to be reflected in the day names of the Mesoamerican ritual calendar. Thus, the sign for position 3 in the Preclassic Zapotec calendar, the earliest calendar for which we have solid evidence, is the depiction of an arrow (Whittaker 1990a; Urcid 2001: 222-224, 230-231), while in China the 3rd *zhi* is also thought to represent an arrow (Guo Moruo 1931, II: 23). So, in this case, both the meaning of the *zhi* itself and the tiger associated with it are paralleled by the Mesoamerican day sign and the jaguar deity associated with it. The *gan* in positions 8 and 10 have been identified as depicting a tattooing knife (Guo 1931, II: 14ff.) and sun-flower (for the Sinological discussion see Whittaker 1990a: 110-112) respectively. If correct, this would match positions 18 and 20 in Mesoamerica, occupied by Knife and Flower, which are parallel to positions 8 and 10 in the second of two *gan* cycles (20 days) placed alongside the 20 Mesoamerican day-names. The complex pattern of structural parallels between the two ritual calendars are discussed in detail in Whittaker (1990a).

In the area of ritual terminology there are further intriguing parallels that deserve detailed examination. The names of certain animals associated with the ritual calendar are among these terms, in particular those for 'dog' and 'monkey'. The Old Chinese term for 'liquidambar resin', 楓 **pjum*, can be compared with Proto-Mixe-Zoque **poomA*, Proto-Mayan **poom*, Totonac and Tepehua *puum*, all of which mean 'copal resin, incense', and lastly Nahuatl *pyoma*- 'fragrant narcotic'. Proto-Mixe-Zoque is thought to have been the language of the Olmecs. Proto-Mayan was a neighbouring language. Among terms for ritual instruments is 'turtle', Old Chinese 鱉 **pjjet*, which resembles Proto-Mayan **peetj* (or **peets*) 'turtle'. Additional terms of interest include words for 'sorcerer', 'potion', 'strike with an axe', and, surprisingly, five basic colour terms in Proto-Mayan.

There is, of course, no tangible evidence at present for contact in the Shang or Western Zhou periods with Mesoamerica. The Olmec culture (ca. 1200-600 B.C.), which is contemporaneous with Late Shang and Western Zhou, exhibits similarities

with Chinese culture only in the area of ritual. While monumental Olmec art, consisting of stelae and colossal stone heads that probably represent rulers, has nothing in common with Chinese art, cave paintings and finely-worked jade figurines seem to suggest early Chinese influence, although this is very much a matter of impressions. Significantly, however, jade is not present at San Lorenzo, the first Olmec centre, but is present in abundance after the latter's fall around 900 B.C. The new Olmec centre, La Venta, imported jade from the Motagua Valley in Honduras, and from this time on, right up to the Spanish conquest, jade is the most precious substance in Mesoamerica, sharing its high value with East Asia alone.

If there was in fact contact between the two regions, many questions remain to be answered. For one thing, we know next to nothing about Shang and early Western Zhou seafaring. Although the Shang imported some items from Southeast Asia, we have no knowledge of the details of this trade. Although currents are favourable to sea travel to America, it is unlikely that any ship that accidentally washed up on eastern shores would ever have made it back to China. And indeed no serious scholar has ever proposed regular two-way contact across the Pacific. How much influence, therefore, can the occasional (or solitary) ship of traders have exerted on the large population of an already well-established Olmec culture? If, as Xu carelessly claims, the Olmec culture was founded by Shang immigrants, why is it so utterly un-Chinese in most aspects? On the other hand, if the Shang or Western Zhou exerted a subtle influence on certain areas of Olmec ritual culture, such as the calendar and divination, how could this have happened? Could a handful of traders be expected to carry with them a detailed knowledge of the ritual calendar? Can one expect priests and diviners to have been on board the average trading ship? How would communication of such complex matters as the calendar have been possible without long-term and intensive contact, for which we have no tangible evidence? These are among the most important questions to be addressed by those interested in the possibility of transoceanic contact. It would be well worth the effort to discuss the various mechanisms of long-distance contact and the consequences of such contact with relation to known historical cases around the world.

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